

CONES OF ZONTACT forum

speakers___ REUBEN KEEHAN IAN MILLISS ZANNY BEGG MARGARET MAYHEW

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LOOSE PROJECTS

Sydney

coordinated by Anne Kay & Lisa Kelly

in response to 'Zones of Contact' 2006 Biennale of Sydney

curated by Charles Merewether



Cones of Zontact forum, publication & exhibition: gathering & browsing.

ANNE KAY__ Thanks, we might get started. Thanks so much for coming. Lisa and I organised this as part of Loose. Does everyone know that there's ten of us in Loose? There's info of the website if you're interested, but it's not just us two. A few of us are here, like Philipa [Veitch], Alex [Gawronski], Jane [Polkinghorne], Mark [Titmarsh]. Yeah, I don't know, do you want to talk a bit about the project?

LISA KELLY__Yeah. So we're sitting inside headquarters of Cones of Zontact, which is a publication project that we came up with. When we started Loose, we pretty much figured on operating as a cooperative kind of project where everyone took a month of the program and devised their own project within that. But in June and the Biennale, and with us having opened quite recently, we were quite keen to do some kind of point of response to the Biennale of Sydney. And as a lot of people here who have participated in the project will appreciate, our interest was to do something that included as many artists living and working in Sydney as possible. Being an observation or counterpoint to the fact that there's only one Sydney based artist in the Zones of Contact exhibition: Ruark Lewis. The infamous Ruark Lewis.

CHRISTOPHER DEAN__ But he's not an artist though.

LK__ You don't think?

CD__ Well if you ask him, he'll tell you one thing. Then another week he's an anthropologist or a poet [laughter]. There's no Australian artists in it.

LK__ So the intention of this forum is, it's a loose forum, it's just to create some informal kind of space for dialogue around issues of points of relationship between large organisational structures, international and national structures, like biennales, and how they kind of relate to ground level artists' communities in the cities that they occur in. Whether that's Sydney, or other people might have experience of biennales in other cities.

AK__ We actually tried to invite people who had experience of being in biennales.

LK__ We tried super hard to get people, other locals who had participated in biennales, or visiting artists from this biennale. Just, it was tough!

AK__ Just hard get in touch with people, and we did it pretty quickly.

CD__ What about Raquel Ormella?

AK__ Yes, we asked her too. She declined. We asked quite a few people. But yeah, but four people here were generous enough to say yes. There's Reuben Keehan and Ian Milliss, Zanny Begg and Margaret Mayhew, also known as Mayhem.

MARGARET MAYHEW__ And Shappylle - Shappylle Scragg.

AK__ Yeah, if you were here at the opening, you won't forget Shappylle! I also invited Brian Fuata and he said he would be in it, but I don't know maybe he's still coming, I don't know.

ALEX GAWRONSKI__ Maybe he's trapped outside?

LK__ Do you want to go check?

AG__ Alright.

AK__ People do shut the door sometimes.

So, how we're going to structure it is that people will have five minutes or so, like just briefly say whatever they want to say about the general topic and then we're hoping that it will be really informal, with lots of exchange and opinions or ideas. And also, we're actually running a series of talks with each show which we're videoing and the aim is to have a little clip on the website where you can have a look at, or listen to it...it won't be very big. And we're also making a DVD archive where the artists get a copy to do what they want with. So we're actually recording, but I'm not manning it or anything, I won't be zooming in on anyone. Is that it?

*LK*__ Yeah, I think that's about it. We're just interested to hear people's thoughts and responses. It's particularly great to have Ian here given his history and writing around artists' direct organisation in relation to the Biennale, kind of engaging the Biennale and addressing the level of participation of Australian artists. And that's both a really heartening and depressing text to read, to realise how consistent the issues are with today.

*AK*__ Yeah in case you've got no idea, he's got a great show on out at Macquarie Uni at the moment. And there's a really useful and accessible website that Ian's compiled, of all the documents from the last couple of decades. And one thing that really triggered me off was the one about the '79 Biennale which was quite controversial and which I had no idea about.

So shall we get started?

*LK*__ Yeah yeah. Who wants to go first?

*ZANNY BEGG*__ Shall we just go around the room?

*REUBEN KEEHAN*__ Ok. I had some notes, but I kind of left them... but I wanted to start by saying that the first thing I encountered of the Biennale - I don't know if some of you guys were there - was at the MCA's opening where Luca Belgiorno-Nettis made a bizarre intervention. Basically, for everybody who wasn't there and hasn't read the account on The Art Life, Liz Ann MacGregor opened the show and invited Helen Coonan, who is the Federal Minister for the Arts, to speak. During which she demonstrated that she doesn't actually know anything about art. And, basically got everybody in the room either a little bit angry or a little bit bored and everyone sort of started talking amongst themselves, and I heard some really nasty exchanges going on in various places in the crowd, who were feeling very passionately either in support or against Helen Coonan.

Luca [Belgiorno-Nettis] decided completely unplanned to get up on stage and make a point for how fantastic the conservative element is. How we should be so thankful to them for implementing, sorry, for commissioning the Myer Report into the visual arts. And that they had done fantastic things and that as fans of the visual arts and as artists, they were paying the grant money, employing us and putting on wonderful things like the Biennale.

*DIEGO BONETTO*__ Wasn't he being ironic?

*MANY PRESENT*__ No.

*RK*__ Was it ironic? No. It was completely unironic.

[laughter]



Cones of Zontact forum : Reuben Keehan

No, it didn't come across as being ironic, it came across as a defence of Helen Coonan. I think he probably felt a little bit apologetic for her, that the crowd had responded in the way it had. Luca obviously hasn't been to a lot of MCA openings, which I've noticed his speeches have trailed off in very much that way. People are more interested in drinking and talking than listening to a bunch of politicians trying to...

What that did for me, apart from the various quite obvious issues around the Myer Report, such as, the fact that while the report has come into being, that it hasn't actually been implemented, that so much has actually been taken away from the visual arts in that the Myer Report is being held up as the fact that apparently the conservative government is so supportive. And the fact that Helen Coonan's speech itself was so vapid, is that, essentially the Biennale is in fact a state sponsored, state supported exhibition.

And I think there is a broader question here and that question is that when we ask questions of what we want from a state sponsored exhibition, we're actually asking what should we expect from the state. So, you know, that opens up broader issues about the fact that artists organisations, autonomous organisations, are not very different from other forms of autonomous organisations—community organisations that are non-art related.

Saying that, it kind of begs the question of - and Marg's excellent point - the observation that the great thing about the Biennale is the number of anti-Biennale shows there are around town. That's been a very interesting thing. But thinking about the overall structure of the Biennale's relationship to the Sydney artists: do we want, is the purpose of the Biennale as it was for the Venice Biennale, to bring all this international art to Australia? Or rather, international visitors into Sydney who wouldn't

normally come here? Which was the initial purpose of the Venice Biennale. Or does it do something else, does it do what Terry Smith said at the opening of the last Biennale, which is to simply ask a question "What is contemporary art?" a question that art writing, having lost its critical function, fails to do these days.

But it's kind of interesting to look at how also the model that we're operating under, a single director, a single curator choosing all the artists. Now, I have to say that I haven't seen the show yet. I can't actually sort of say how effective it is as an exhibition, it may well be very, very interesting as an exhibition, and the works themselves may be quite interesting. But it kind of seems to me illustrative of what this government is doing to Australia, which is to...to bureaucratised things to a point where there seems to be no longer any kind of actual community engagement with what's going on. And the Biennale stands as a kind of model of this.

In my ideal Biennale, which is where you use the Biennale's resources to bring artists to Australia, but you give independent spaces the resources. You give them access to these artists so that they can sort of plan the programs more according to how their audiences engage with these more appropriately. So for instance, rather than having an exhibition in the space, you could have a series of artists talks and presentations where you invite along people from the local community who could engage directly with these artists. Is it always about showing objects or commodities? It can also be about the processes of engagement, like we're doing now – speaking – that kinds of objects arise out of. For a number of artists these kinds of engagements are the very work that they do.

So I think there's a few factors there that we need to think about, we need to recognise that the Biennale is a state sponsored exhibition. We want to see how much we can expect from a state exhibition in the current state of affairs. And we need to think about what we would like a state sponsored exhibition to be doing, and as a consequence what we would like the state to be doing.

*IAN MILLISS*__I'm being advertised as the old hand here because I've been around every last one of the Biennales since they started in 1973. And, it's sort of depressing and at the same time heartening that in lots of ways nothing's changed. The sort of things you've been talking about happening now [*points to Reuben*] are in fact very similar to the sorts of things that were happening in the '70's.

The original Biennale - I was explaining this to someone the other day - Franco Belgiorno-Nettis started a thing called the Transfield prize, which originally wasn't an art prize and anybody could be in it. It became so big it became unmanageable they changed it so that it was an invited prize. And so for two years in a row it was an invited prize. During those two years the things that won were basically, early types of conceptual art, this was in 1970 to '71. Then he set up the Sydney Biennale, using the money from the transport business.

But essentially he set it up as a colonialist gesture, to basically get in international art, because in a sense we had shown we couldn't get it right. He had to bring in this stuff to show us how to do it. So basically, he brought in a lot of international art, to show the rest of us this is the way it should be done. Now essentially that has been going on in Australian institutions as long as they've existed. International art of every sort whether it was 19th century English Salon Art, right through to the Biennale, it has always been this essentially colonialist enterprise to teach us the way things should be done. And the cultural cringe, the much discussed cultural cringe of the 40's and 50's simply got re-badged as internationalism and represented as terribly glamorous. But the idea was that this was the stuff was the stuff we should be looking at and conforming to.

So, after...the result of this in 1973 was that the so called Biennales, which in fact happened every three years, which were '73, '76 and '79. There became an increasing protest against them and we started fighting. We didn't take this lying down. We wanted 50% Australian representation and 50% women. And we never completely got that, at least not in '79. It's interesting but one of the people who was part of the group was Charles Merewether.

[laughter]

IM__ Yes. And it's interesting that this year you have, I think it's 7 Australian artists, out of 85 artists, or something like that. And this illustrates I think the point that, and I don't see there is even any point in putting shit on Charles personally about this. But it illustrates the point that we are dealing with a type of phenomenon that you can't expect to have a personal influence on. You basically, it's a meme. Biennales are a meme. They have their own life, their own format, their own way of existing and no single individual can affect them. You simply slot into them and you play your role, you're not going to change them. They exist around the world, they are all part of global dominance. They are a globalist franchise. No matter what you say...



Cones of Zontact forum : Ian Milliss

And I hope that at no point of this do we end up discussing the actual art in it. Simply because, all the art in it is endlessly interchangeable forever. No matter what you put in it, you could put something else in it, no matter what the theme is, the theme could be different but the same, because none of those are what matters. What matters is the organisational structure which works in a certain way and circulates a type of globalist art. And the point about globalist art is exactly what you said [*points to Reuben Keehan*], that it does not engage the people there in the place that it is happening. It's basically a way of saying, this is art, it's not for the likes of you lot, you know, just sit back and watch

it, learn your lesson from it, do what you're told and you can keep on farting around the edges making bad imitations of it. That's it. And with government money at that.

And that's the way it works, that's its actual role. You can't criticise it for that, because that's actually what it does. That's its role to do that, to be an alienating, unengaging activity. Because people start making art and they start thinking about the job they've done their whole life, they start thinking they have a say in things, they start thinking that they can actually intervene, make their own history and then somehow or another do things. And that's the last thing that you're actually meant to do in our society. And for a culture of an extremist right-wing government like we have that's the ultimate taboo, if you're actually trying to engage with your own life, to use your own life to change society in some way or another.

The Biennale is just one of an endless number of examples you've got in this society. They exist on all levels, in all sorts of ways. There are numerous ones in the media in general. It's all well and good to say that is irrelevant too. The only thing that is relevant when you get to that point is "what do we do about it?"

Now I actually find this period of time...I mean it's funny because Mayhem [*Margaret Mayhew*] said to me something about "Oh, the good old days." And actually I think this is the 'good old days'. Because right now is actually for me...There was a time you know in the 70's when I think people were really engaged and actually doing something. In between, the market took up art back again, you've had completely market driven art for thirty years. Actually, you can see the splits again now, things are starting to happen. People are actually starting to in some way or other, trying to deal with that and trying to find their way out again. Even things like this are an example of it, or the examples of what you were saying [*points to Reuben*]. There are a range of activities out there where I think people are trying to take it back.

The only thing you can do with Biennales is to put up your own small things around the edges. That's one of the things you can do. And meanwhile get on with having a life! Get on with making art. It's one of the things artists should do, and it doesn't have to be for the biennale. And I know it won't simply die and go away, because I've spent decades ignoring the art world and it won't go away. But if you can keep other things going and just sort of keep the faith. And try to make art which can engage directly with communities, so it's actually got an audience. And that's the only thing, you can put up a bit of resistance for the time being. Things might change further along the line but right now, things like this are really important. That's all I have to say.

ZANNY BEGG__ Ok. Well, I can't really comment on the art... But I would say of the three venues I've been to, I've actually seen some work that I really liked. I've been to the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art), SCA (Sydney College of the Arts) and Artspace. And I do intend to actually go and properly look. So I don't like to ignore the Biennale - I appreciate being able to see work from around the world. So maybe my position is not as critical as Ian's in that respect. And I'm also curious too, if people in this room were invited to participate in the Biennale, whether they'd say yes or no? If that position is totally anti, or whether you can actually engage...

CD__ You've probably got to write a catalogue essay.

ZB__ I throw that out maybe for discussion later.

IM__ We should talk about that. It's actually a good question.

ZB__ Yep, and I think it would be one worth considering. So, I guess from my point of view I think there are points at which you can engage, and sometimes usefully. And I think some artists have done some really interesting projects. The problem that I have is with the model itself, which is that it's a very product-orientated rather than process-orientated event. Which is the spectacular, wham-bam, 'this is Sydney'. And I think that model itself is extremely vertical rather than horizontal. Which means that, ironically enough, even though it's called Zones of Contact, there actually hasn't been very many contacts actually made out of the process. So that all these, I think, actually extremely critical and interesting artists have come to Sydney - I'm not actually dissing the artists who are involved in the Biennale. Some of them have really interesting practices, and are doing very interesting things in their particular context. But we don't get to meet them. And they don't really get to engage with the artistic community here in Sydney.



Cones of Zontact forum : Zanny Begg

Just by way of illustrating that with an anecdotal story, I met a guy today from Russia who did a talk down at the MCA, whose work I think is really interesting. And we were just chatting at the end, and he was interested in meeting with Left artists. And he went to the Labor party today to a meeting [laughter], and met Bob Gould! And was down at Gould's bookstore. That's who he came across! And I was 'Why didn't I meet you earlier?' - and he leaves tomorrow. So the frustrating experience is that these are, I think, very very interesting and often very very good artists. But they don't get to connect into a community here in Sydney, where those become useful interactions. Where, if it had of been a week ago, I could of introduced him to a whole lot of people and there would have been a real connection there, that would be lasting and would actually have some impact on him, and here in Sydney. So, I think, this is my criticism. It's not necessarily of the artists at all, actually, but of the model.

And I thought I'd use my time briefly just to perhaps give an idea of an alternative model. Because I was lucky enough to participate in an Argentinian project, in Buenos Aires. Which I thought maybe I'd give just a rundown sketch. Because that was quite an international show - it had 45 artists in it, and it had a lot of money. So it was kind of *comparable* to the biennale. It's not a biennale, but it was comparable in some ways. But worked on a completely different basis, where the curators had a specific theme rather than these *general* themes you see often in biennales. And they were responding to the crisis of 1999-2002 and the economic collapse. And they wanted to do a show in response to that, and they actually took five years to do that show. Where they initially went to Argentina for eight months - and they spent time on the street, at protests, as part of that whole explosion that happened in Argentina. Then they went back and did a show in Cologne, in Germany, and then one in Barcelona. So they tried to develop a sort of interaction between artists from Europe who were going to be included in the show and the artists from South America. And then finally they came back, to do the show in Buenos Aires.

And just by way of illustration, we stayed in a hotel which was occupied by workers - they'd taken over running this hotel. The catalogue wasn't printed but the printing press was run by workers. Because of the collapse of whole sections of the economy, things were being taken over by workers. And discussions like this happened in organisations like social centres. So there was actually a genuine connection. When you went to the opening, the show did look comparable to a biennale in the sense that you had a lot of critical video works, and all the kind of work we'd expect to see. But at the opening you had huge, enormous amounts of people who were activists who were actually involved in these campaigns and were connecting with the artists. And a lot of the artists from Europe came and did collaborative projects with artists in Argentina. And the connections that were made were incredibly lasting, and projects are still coming out of that experience.

And I'm just saying that by way of a counter-position to the biennale experience. And I think that would be a much more useful model, in terms of bringing very good and critical artists - which the biennale does do - but in a way that actually means that they get something out of Australia. And we get something out of them being here.

And just my final point is that I think Mori's show downstairs [*Mori Gallery 'Exhibition of Protest' and event at Kurnell peninsula, site of proposed water desalination plant*] was a really interesting experience, that was trying to do some sort of show in relation to the biennale. And I don't know if really any of the international artists actually came or even knew about it. And things like that are just a bit of a wasted opportunity. Anyway, that's what I wanted to say.

MARGARET MAYHEM__ Well, here I am behind Nobody. Whenever I give a talk I like to go around and have a look at stuff, and my favourite place to go is the Bilich gallery. The Charles Bilich gallery - you've gotta go down there! He's probably Australia's most prolific artist. He makes Ken Done look like Van Gogh, and he gets an enormous amount of public commissions.

So that's why Reuben's point speaking about the current government, which are very right-wing, it's true. Because that's the kind of art that people like. You know, maybe a bit of Norman Lindsay if they want to be risqué. A bit of Whitely. But that's what we're up against. I mean they hate every single thing that we do. Every single part of it. We're in a conflicted industry in a hostile state. But the Biennale itself I find is so contradictory.

I got this! [*holds up Zones of Contact catalogue*] It was actually stolen by my flatmate, who then decided to cut it up. And I managed to grab it off them - destructive freak downstairs! [*laughter*]



Cones of Zontact forum : Margaret Mayhem

Anyway, so I was reading this, and Charles Merewether's essay is wonderful. It's so moving and profound and lovely, and you think about all these theories of relationships and building community. And when you open it up, and [turning pages] there's filler and introductions. And then there's one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. Ok, so you've got eleven pages of corporate logos. So this is the type of community that a Biennale creates.

All this lovely beautiful rhetoric, which I'm really happy to appropriate. I think it's lovely, it speaks to me. This isn't a community because it is something that is part of a state, and it is something that is increasingly corporate, where art's just kind of, you know. I mean, art's a spectacular religion of our culture. Our capitalist culture is about speculation and possibility. And they're working in teamwork, and it's a lovely example of that. And that's what I was thinking. It's not like you can go "oh, Charles Merewether, he's not like he was in the olden days, where have his radical roots gone?" Again, he's part of this machine. It's like being a director of a large corporation. This bizarre faceless thing.

And the words in there are lovely. And it's so incredible to me, that someone like Helen Coonan and Belgioirio-Nettis... I mean, I thought the Triple M crowd went to the MCA. And you know, they're not quite my people. Eugh. Odd. *[laughter]* And to imagine them there amongst some of that work, because there's that lovely piece downstairs... a lot of it's about immigration, a lot of it's about detention camps. And I was there because it was a rainy Saturday and half of Sydney was hungover. There were a lot of people who drifted in off Circular Quay because it was too cold to catch a ferry. And they're wandering around amongst this work that you know - it is poignant, it is cognitive, it is political, it is all of these things. It does remind us of the beauty of what we've lost now Australia's immigration policy has become horribly bad. I mean I think it's part of capitalism and part of the logic of capitalism and the logic of capitalist culture that,, we see institutions like this and we go "oh, if only", "oh, but not".

And I'd probably go halfway between Ian and Zanny's thing, because I'd go "they're up there" and "I'm down here, and I'm a piece of shit", but we still have to engage with the possibility of being in that. So yeah man, if they asked me to write a catalogue essay, I'd fucken do it. You know I got a thing from a curator saying "will you put in photos for so & so's exhibition" & I was like "Yes! I'd like to have my ear in Artspace as part of...I'd feel good!" I don't know about other people, but I'm an art slut. And any fucken possibility to integrate into society is good, because I know what it's like to be totally out of society. And it's not fun, even if that society is fucked. Which it is, until you realise it is.

So there's that. And then there's walking around seeing SAFARI. And someone goes "oh wouldn't it be good if all the ARI's were in one spot. You know, like Danks St" *[laughter]*. So in the context of a social and cultural geography, where I guess a lot of people in this room are part of the very precariousness of working as artists and exhibitors, and as gallery directors. And increasingly aware of the precarity of the community, and you know the best aspect of this community is just artists. And it's freaky seeing this lovely rhetoric spectacle kind of placed above us. And it's like "Ah!" "Oh."

So I don't think I've got any solutions other than keep on truckin' on. And I think also it's our role. I think it's also the art institutions, because they're porous. And that's really interesting, when there can be some relationship with what's on the outside. And so our role is to sort of sit there and scream on the edges. And offer ourselves as mediators and might possibly be fucken recuperated. You know, I'm not going to hate anyone for wanting to be able to have a mortgage and feed their children in twenty years time. You know, it's hard to fucken live in this world. So I guess that moment is on that edge, kind of dancing with possibilities and dancing with your own...

ALEX GAWRONSKI__ *[pointing]* Is that the Australian magazine? Is that the one that has Charles Merewether in it? Oh, Broadsheet. Did anyone see that Good Weekend or Australian magazine... the Sydney magazine, where he was saying "I went here, and met this artist" and his itinerary. There was a great highlighted piece of text as well, which is kind of interesting. Where he says "it's as though the art world is run by beautiful, young women". This was highlighted in the Australian magazine from the curator of the Biennale! I mean that is just... I thought that was really telling.

MM__ I'm tempted now...sorry

IM__ One of the things...I mean I sound more purist than I am, in reality...

ZB__ Answer my question!

IM__ Rhetorically I'll take quite a hard line. But I think Margaret is touching on one of my real points about it, which is that capitalism can commodify anything. It can even commodify exactly that complexity of feeling. You can get lured into thinking you can actually do something with this, again. That's why I'm not prepared to attack Charles per se. And I'm not saying that he's lost his radical or earlier ground. He's just been slotted into the machine. And part of what the machine is is exactly that.

Therefore, "would one be in the Biennale?" Well, on one level, being asked to be in it - as Lucas described recently - you're just a content provider. I mean you really don't have any...you're just slotted in. If you could actually think that... I mean I don't think you're going to bring the world down or anything if you do, but you can always leave a trail of stuff, which has actually has an effect over time. I mean things do actually get dredged up again, as I know only too well. You can actually do

little things. But would I want to be a 'Biennale artist'? I can't think of anything worse. I really would not want to be. But in Sydney, where it's about Sydney, the Sydney Biennale, I might actually. I just might. I certainly wouldn't dismiss it offhand, and I don't think anyone should. And I would never criticise anyone for being a part of it. Because this is our community. That's one of the things to be said about the Sydney Biennale - where's the Sydney in it?

AG__ Like the Venice Biennale, it would be hard to imagine that there would be seven Italian artists. It would be impossible...

LK__ Well, Carolyn Christov-Barkagiev said that the other day. She said that the Venice Biennale doesn't actually include that many Italian artists. I think it's an interesting problem....

*DIEGO BONETTO*__ Right, so, I'm going to start with Reuben. Reuben, the guy who stood up and painted the glory of the conservative government. It really was ironic. Then he came off the stage and we thought fantastic. I mean, no better tactics than positive reinforcement! *[laughter]*

Then going on to over here, it just seems to me that there's two big forces. The Biennale, the corporate Biennale, and then the locals, the fringe, artists and everything else. The Biennale's relationship, it's dangerous. I don't think maybe we should see it as such, as a Biennale relationship. That the ones in the Biennale are the chosen ones, or the ones who choose. The show itself, and the rest - the fringe, the ARI and whatever. Cones of Zontact. Maybe we should talk about that, and maybe find a different way to go beyond this Biennale. It's so easy to, as you say before, to commodify. To just box off a couple of guys, stamp, that's it.

When you were saying about this artist Dmitri *[Gutov]* ... fantastic man, he's amazing. I had a chance to work with him. I had a chance to work with lots of these artists, at the MCA, Artspace, Walsh Bay. I've had contact with lots of the artists. Many of them fantastic, and some of the projects are amazing. I've seen pretty much everything in the past few days, and gone to the most talks that I could go. Because I really believe that there's some great works and great artists with great things to say. And critical to institutions, just as much as we are, they are us. Many of them. And many of them came over here, with their local product, that they do in Pakistan, India, Brazil, whatever. Which made sense. They come over here, take it out of context, slap it on the wall and "this is art". And they know themselves it doesn't work. They know themselves it's just commodifying a feeling, an issue, and so forth. And they come over here and they start asking "So what's happening in Sydney? What's happening locally?" And I didn't answer. I'm sorry guys, but what do we have to offer? What have we to offer these international artists? I mean, SAFARI? What, fifteen artists, is that what we have to offer? And Cones of Zontact, it's a book. And unfortunately there's only 170 copies. And unfortunately there's not many international artists who knew anything about it.

So maybe, more than saying, you know it's all the Biennale's fault and blah blah blah... maybe we should think about some sort of process that we come through and we present the fringe, as they call it, and as many other biennales do have. Venice doesn't have many Italian artists invited. But there is so much fringe complement to the Venice Biennale - run by artists, Italian collectives, whatever, which do sort of suck the audience from the Biennale. Just as much as the Biennale itself provides the audience.

AG__ Maybe it's just part of the broader political climate? That you know, people...

DB__ Apathy?

AG__ Yeah well part of it, yeah. Not that it should be artists' role to have ...but I think where there are sort of dynamics and political climates, and it's not to say that it's not dynamic here. But I mean the mind boggles when you look at the past ten years of the Liberal government, and then it does seem impossible really. Even people who voted for John Howard who were thinking they would get some sort of moderate right-wing scenario...

ZB__ But I think Diego has got a point. Because a lot of the connections that happened with the artists - like you and Dmitri - was because you were employed by the institutions. And certainly I got tickets to go to the party or whatever because of employment, really. And that's a kind of access, that some people have and some don't have. Whereas maybe if people were more active, and artists actually independently coordinated...because I know there were drinks to greet the artists of the Biennale, where you could go and get to meet people. Maybe we should take initiative in setting up discussions. I guess like you guys tried to do...

DB__ You know, for example, I would have been more than happy while I was working away, to be distributing flyers. That's all it takes. For people to get the flyers and see oh yes, there's something local going on.

ZB__ There would be interest from the other side, I am sure! Because these artists don't want to just rock in and stay at the Sofitel hotel for a week and only meet the international art circuit necessarily.

DB__ And then they get to know where Chinatown is. So they don't have to spend so much money.

ZB__ You know maybe there are some who wouldn't want to be involved in this kind of engagement anyway. But I'm sure there are lots that, as Diego said, they are us. Other than the context...

LK__ I think that's true. I think it's a good point that there has been a lot of local artist involvement in the Biennale in the form of labour and volunteerism. The Biennale is disgustingly reliant on last minute volunteer labour...

AG__ And a lot of those people are other artists...

LK__ Yeah. So that is an important point of contact. But I just think that's questionable, from an industrial relations point of view...

IM__ It's one more form of exploitation.

LK__ It is.

RK__ I can remember quite recently, actually the day before the show opened, the email that went around saying that the Antony Gormley work hadn't "quite" been finished. Outlining why it would be such a great opportunity, "because Antony Gormley is such a well respected artist, it would be great for you to meet him". You know, and have him tell you what to do.

JANE POLKINGHORNE__ I volunteered when he came out here in '99, at the Art Gallery. And did that same work in a space about twice as small.

RK__ Yeah, so the appeal is seen as that "you get to meet this really famous person, guys". For like three seconds when he says "don't put that there". You exploit the division, you exploit the feeling people have that there is a hierarchy and that they feel they'll never be able to ascend up that

hierarchy. The appeal for artists is that they can work with these people.

DB__ But Antony Gormley, he can just go down the drain! *[laughter]*

You know, we couldn't care less. There's artists over there, which are me and you. They do not play power games.

IM__ But the thing is, there can be good artists, there can be bad artists. It doesn't matter. You can run around the yard and paint a Jackson Pollock, or you can run around the yard and just run around the yard. Running around the yard is running around the yard, and that's what Biennales are like. It doesn't matter whether the artists are good, bad or indifferent. And I agree, I'm sure, especially this year, there may well be some good and interesting people who really are just like us. They've been pulled out of their country. They are people who work with communities. They've been slotted into this thing, and it just proves that anything can be slotted into a Biennale. And it would be lovely to meet them. But in a sense you're not going to find out much in the end. Any more than you would if you were pulled out of here. You can't relate to it in that way.

What you were talking about *[to Zanny]* was a much more real thing, where you bring people into a community, __ __ And it's not as though I've got anything against international art. I'd love to see more of it, I just don't want to see it jammed into tin cans.

ANNE KAY__ Actually I had a question for Reuben. You know when you were saying before about maybe having the Biennale be more kind of dispersed and not so centralized...?

RK__ Yeah. I mean I really like the model, the idea of having it in sixteen different venues so that for viewers there's some sort of volunteerism in negotiating their way to these venues. So that people who've actually never been to the place before can discover the city in different ways. I think that's very very interesting. What's kind of a bit off-putting about that is that stuff is imported, the Biennale organises things for the venues. Often plonks artists down who are kind of inappropriate for those venues. And then, from my experience, the venues have to try and pull things off because the Biennale can't manage it. Because they're underresourced. Because they aren't really well funded.

AK__ What I wanted to ask you about though, you made the comment that it would be really great to have someone more appropriate there, and then to be able to be more autonomous, was what I interpreted. And what interested me particularly about that was you mentioned about bringing in perhaps local people, like local residents. And that made me have a question about, I mean I know that the Biennale has been a lot more populist. There's been a lot of stuff on TV. But with places or venues like, not so much the MCA, there's not really a resident base there. But Artspace is in a suburb. And I know that you've only been at Artspace a little while. And I've had letters about how things are changing down there and whatever. But in my experience a lot of these venues are not actually integrated or not having any contact with their local community whatsoever. So how would that idea work?

RK__ Well not all institutions are actually going to be real community contact organisations. The MCA, which is a kind of main institution, that's something they just wouldn't want to do. I'm kind of more interested in the idea of putting say artist-run spaces in contact with the artists. Put Biennale artists in artist-run spaces. Or let them work more closely with communities as they're developing work. It happened a little bit with the last Biennale, with one or two artists who came out and spent a significant amount of time in residence. Javier Tellez, out at Rozelle Hospital, made a work in which he acknowledged all of the people who helped him make the work. That was really interesting. But not enough of that really happens.

And it's something I kind of alluded to in my Cones of Zontact contribution, something I don't know if I articulated clearly enough. Just in the same way that a lot of movies are made in Sydney, that actually remove what's specific about Sydney - think about The Matrix for example, it's recognisably Sydney, but they were careful to remove the Sydney landmarks. It becomes a generic city. That's the same as the Biennale model that they're actually operating under. It's a generic model. And actually this Biennale, with all its artists, it could have taken place in any city in the world. It's not specifically Sydney. I think there has to be much more dialogue occurring.

And I think that institutions can facilitate that dialogue. Institutions are better resourced to facilitate that dialogue than the Biennale, which is a very small organisation. And I think if they were able to break down some of the hierarchical structures that are currently operating, then there might be the chance for more engagement. People won't feel so alienated. The visiting artists would actually be able to take something back. And that may even be, say if you put someone in residency, it may even be time for them to go 'bugger all the other distractions in my life, I'm just going to sit down and make some work. I can go out every night and meet people.' Then at least they have a memorable experience, and you're actually giving people choices. Not limiting choices, which is what the current Biennale structure does at the moment.

LK__ I think it's really important to insist on the role of the institutions to facilitate. There's been so much guff in the air about 'exchange', 'hospitality', 'transmission'. How can this possibly be effected practically when there's just been so little facilitation between Biennale artists and the local community? I just think that participation is the primary level at which that kind of exchange occurs, in my experience. In set-up time and drinks and dinner after the show. All that kind of space. It's the act of involvement that creates those kind of spaces of interaction and real relationship, that you do take away with you.

RK__ Look, there are Biennale models that are actually approaching this in the world. There are models, even major institutional ones, like the Eichigo-Tsumari Triennial in Japan. Which occurs in a rural area and where permanent works are made. There's large scale special projects as well as works of international artists. Where there's a huge amount of community involvement that actually occurs in that process. In quite a rare and very intriguing way. And those kind of events, rather than the generic biennale model, which is what you see in many cities in the world, you do actually have a specific sense of location. Which makes it really interesting.

MM__ We've always been obsessed with what Sydney is. Sydney in the past ten, twenty years has been a city that's been deracinated. And elements of Sydney, community spaces, have been not eradicated, but under a certain amount of challenge...You know I'm just kind of aware that it's a teflon surface we've got, and we're clinging to that a little bit...

RK__ It's true, and funnily enough there is a kind of two way effect. And I'm recalling actually a couple of years ago talking to Lu Jie, who's one of the directors of the Long March residency in China. Which is this fantastic residency where artists follow the path of the long march. There being twelve kind of stations along the way, where they can exhibit, do some work, engage with the local community, based on this idea more of the journey and of the process, than of any kind of end-product.

In any case, he was talking about the effect that the international biennale culture has had on Chinese artists. There's a phenomenal amount of interest. The fact that China and Chinese artists have become very very fashionable, which is about the boom of this particular model of bureaucratic capitalism.

And he said that he'd visit, as a curator, a lot of Chinese artists, who would have walls down the middle of their studios. On one side of the wall was the work they were making for biennales, that they thought the biennale audiences and biennale curators would want to see. And on the other side of the wall, was hidden away their own practice.

CHRISTOPHER DEAN__ They're like art schools...

DANIELLE FREAKLEY__ *[interjection]* Sorry, can I just...I've gotta catch a plane now! *[darts in & out of space snatching a copy of Cones of Zontact, throwing down twenty dollars]*.

AK__ Thankyou!

[laughter]

CD__ There's a zone of contact for you.

IM__ A real collector.

AG__ Thanks for coming. Twenty bucks!

IM__ It's interesting, because my friend Guo Jian, a Chinese artist, always laughs about the fact that he and his Chinese artist friends see themselves as rebelling against official art. And he keeps pointing out to them that they've just exchanging one official art for a different official art.

AG__ It's like someone was telling me this story, something that was on SBS maybe, like artists who do famous reproductions. One guy did Mona Lisa's over and over again. Amazing facility, but just producing for this market. In some ways, what's the difference between "well here's my biennale work and I'll just do this out the back, in the shed."

RK__ Basically the effect has been that genuine Chinese contemporary art is being eradicated. That official state policy is to fund the work of artists that most looks like it belongs in international biennales.

AG__ Which is what capitalism does.

IM__ I just want to add something about this, right. The reason why I think this was all so problematic in the 1970's is because in the late '60's you had Australian artists who by that stage were so in contact with the rest of the world. They knew everything that was going on. Communications media had improved. So nobody felt like they were impoverished at all. And they basically made their own work. One of the reasons why it became so problematic in the '70's, and something we fought for, which was the Australia Council and government funding. In actual fact it had exactly the practical effect of what you are talking about. And it basically wiped out that independence and originality that had developed from the late '60's up to the mid '70's. Because it was a bureaucracy and like all bureaucracies it takes safe bets. Rather than make judgements about what might or might not be good, which might blow up in your face. It was far easier to simply find Australian artists who matched what was going on somewhere else. Where you have a pre-digested understanding of what it was supposed to be doing. You'd say "hey, you've got a self-mutilator - we've got a self-mutilator too". And do things like that. *[laughter]*

And that then became Australian official art. And it's no different to what you're talking about with

the Chinese thing. Except when it happens in your own society it's a little difficult to recognize. Because it has a different feel to it. Which they can't obviously, in a sense, can't come to grips with either. Even when it's that obvious that they do it.



Cones of Zontact forum : Diego Bonetto, Lucas Ihlein, Margaret Mayhem, Sister Joan, Ian Geraghty, Wendy Carlson, Alex Gawronski.

AG__ But I think it serves a different point there as well. Because, you know, avant-gardism was so repressed by the communist regime. Now that it's not communist, but communo-capitalist, it was kind of like where people were like "the avant-garde is over in the West". Here we have this stuff now, that China's become more open to the market and it's "check this out! We've got some avant-garde stuff here now. Dig it." It plays right into a market.

IM__ It's very easy to mistake a different form of slavery for freedom. When you've only had one form of slavery. That's in fact what's going on.

CD__ One word that needs to be injected into this debate, especially with the Sydney Biennale, is the word provincialism. I'm surprised it hasn't come up yet. But in relation to all the provincialism debates, and it's an odd twist of fate that Charles Merewether is the director. I thought he was Ian Burn's sidekick in the eighties. And he's become the new tsar, to quote Ian Burn.

But I think when you look at the Biennale and it's connection to provincialism, it's a really a hangover from a different era. A naïve era perhaps, when it was perceived that Australian artists and the Australian public in general had no knowledge of anything beyond our shores. And in that sense, that really puts it into perspective as something which is redundant.

Now I suppose if you're talking about some sort of interventionist tactic as far as siphoning off the big

budget and using it for something more productive, as a completely different form, well then that would be a very worthwhile endeavour. In that way the Biennale is like the Mardi Gras. And I think some interesting parallels there could be developed, as it being some sort of public entity or festival.

And I think it's sad and somewhat tragic, having attended Rene Block's talk last night, the keynote address. If that says anything about the way in which the Biennale is framed well it's an absolute tragedy and an absolute flop. He arrived off the plane, he's obviously jetlagged and he gave a speech which was basically completely incoherent. And a waste of \$25, I might add, to boot. As I said to my mother this morning, "I was ripped off last night!" She said "what happened?" I said "I had \$25 stolen from me."

[laughter]

LK__ By Rene Block.

CD__ By Rene Block. *[laughter]* And so in that sense the Biennale is very much a period piece. And if you compare it and contrast it to the '73 one, which was the really innovative Biennale, perhaps the only innovative Biennale, if you look at the statistics of the whole scenario. And that's why I wore my little badge today, which was the first Biennale I attended. 1984. I think that was Bill Wright's Biennale? And it was called 'Private Symbol Social Metaphor.' *[laughter]* A great title.

AG__ Immemorable. Immemorable.

CD__ And so we have to follow the trajectory. I actually painted it on a necktie once. I got a lot of pleasure in doing that. So is there a solution to all of this? Well, I don't know. But perhaps the only solution, and this is something I'm a bit wary of Zanny, when I came to hear your talk. And it's so funny, I've heard your name mentioned so often before, that in a way I had this Duchampian sort of imagination of you. In the sense that I imagined you to be a dark-skinned young boy. Maybe that was more fantasy than anything...

[laughter]

TAPE 1__

transcription by Anne Kay & Lisa Kelly from poor audio recording, abridged in parts.

forum continues on...

TAPE 2__

mp3 audio file of selected listening available at www.looseprojects.net